1: Freeman E-5 (1949-1951)1955 OC6 Iban OC6

Introduction

121 IN September, 1948, I was appointed to undertake anthropological research in Sarawak under the auspices of the Colonial Social Science Research Council. The Secretary of the Colonial Social Science Research Council laid down as follows the nature of my research work: "a study of a traditionally based, stable, Iban community based on shifting dry rice cultivation and not subject to undue land shortage . . . . as described in 'A Report on the Possibilities of a Social Economic Survey of Sarawak,' by Dr. E. R. Leach".[1]

114 I arrived in Sarawak in January, 1949, and remained in the Colony until June, 1951. For most of this period I was working among the Iban of the Baleh region of the Kapit District of the Third Division. Our base camp was at Rumah Nyala in Sungai Sut, but field research was carried on in many other parts of the Baleh region—particularly in the headwaters of the Mujong. Visits were also made to Iban communities of the lower, middle and upper Rejang, the Katibas and Ngemah (in the Third Division), and of the Saribas and Ulu Batang Ai (in the Second Division). In studying agriculture many months were spent living on Iban farms, and this report is based on intensive first-hand observation; all of my investigations were carried on in the Iban language.

144 The Iban (or Sea Dayaks) belong to an ethnic stock which Haddon has called
141 Proto-Malay. In brief, they are a brachycephalic people (average C. I. 83) of
142 short stature (average height 5ft. 2½ins.), with black, lank hair and cinnamon
197 coloured skin. Iban culture is basically proto-Malayan in type. Howell, our greatest authority on the Iban language, had no hesitation in classing it as "a dialect of the wide spreading Malay language." However, it is a dialect which has become intermixed with words borrowed from the various Borneo tribes with which the Iban have come into contact. Again, the Iban language, although it does contain a number of words that are Sanskrit in origin, has not been influenced by Arabic as have the languages of the peninsular Malays and the Menangkabau of Sumatra.

161 In Sarawak to-day, the Iban are the predominant element in a highly hetero-
162 geneous population. The total population of Sarawak as disclosed by the census of 1947 was 546,385, and of this number 190,326 (or 34·8%) were Iban. The past century has been for the Iban an era of expansion and they are now scattered over most of the interior zone of Sarawak—from the Samarahan river in the First Division to the Limbang river in the Fifth Division, about four hundred miles away to the north-east. However, the main concentrations of Iban population are to be found in the Second and Third Divisions.

211 Formerly, all of the Iban of Sarawak were shifting cultivators growing their
177 *padi* on hillside clearings in the tropical rain-forest. To-day, there are a number of Iban communities (particularly in the lower reaches of the Lupar, Saribas and Rejang rivers) who derive their livelihood from the cultivation of wet *padi* in

[1] Leach, E. R., "Social Science Research in Sarawak," Colonial Research Studies No. 1, London, 1950.

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Part II

LAND TENURE

Historical Introduction

22. At the end of the eighteenth century, the basin of the great Rejang River was a sparsely populated region. The whole of its southern flank (the part which is the particular concern of this report), the area, that is, drained by the Kanowit, Poi, Ngemah, Katibas and Baleh rivers, was an unbroken tract of primeval rain-forest, virtually untouched by man. Here and there along the main rivers of this region (the Rejang between Sibu and the Pelagus Rapids, and parts of the Baleh), there were settled communities—such as the Kanowits, the Tanjongs, and the Lugats—living in long-houses and cultivating the land. But these scattered peoples numbered not more than one or two thousand souls, and their activities had wrought little change in their natural environment. Most of this vast tract of forest was the territory of bands of nomadic Ukits and Bukitans, who relied on the plants and animals of the jungle for their subsistence, and who did not practise the cultivation of rice, or of any other staple crop. During the nineteenth century major changes were to happen. This largely inviolate natural region became the scene of human migrations which were to alter the entire face of the land. The newcomers—the Iban—came from the immediate south. They were a virile and truculent people, whose whole way of life was based on the cultivation of hill rice. For them, the virgin forests of the valleys of the Rejang held the promise of those bountiful and heavy harvests which are the foremost aim of all Iban endeavour. Moreover these forests—so sparsely inhabited—were the territory of no powerful rival tribe; they were there for the taking, and take them the Iban did. By any standards these great Iban migrations into the Rejang and beyond were the most momentous happening in the social and economic history of nineteenth century Sarawak.

23. At the commencement of the nineteenth century, there were probably no Iban living north of the southern watershed of the Rejang basin. To-day, there are more than 114,000 Iban[1] settled in areas northward of this line (Sketch Map 2). They constitute more than one-fifth of the total population of Sarawak, and more than three-fifths of the entire Iban population of the country. In both the Third and Fourth Divisions, they are now the dominant groups in mixed populations.

24. The documentation of the Iban migrations into the valleys of the Rejang is far from complete (especially in its initial stages); but such records as do

[1] In the Population Census of 1947, the Iban (or Sea Dayak) population of the Third, Fourth and Fifth Divisions is shown to be 113,498, while that of Brunei is shown as 1,330. The total population of Sarawak was 546,385, including 190,326 Ibans.

1: Freeman E-5 (1949-1951)1955 OC6 Iban OC6

shortage of rice, which shows small sign of abating, it would seem essential that Sarawak should strive as far as possible to meet her own requirements, and this situation greatly complicates the task of dealing with shifting cultivation. In areas like the Saribas District, there appears to be no alternative but large scale development of wet *padi* cultivation and extensive re-settlement of the local Dayak population.

The Problem of Shifting Cultivation in Pioneer Areas

320. Let us now return to the problem of shifting cultivation in the pioneer areas—such as the Baleh—which are the primary concern of this report. Here we are faced with a very different situation. In none of these areas (as far as I have been able to determine) has the density of population reached a dangerous level. Because of the lack of detailed, small-scale maps, the reckoning of population densities for many of the interior districts of Sarawak is a difficult task, and often only very approximate estimates are possible. However, as an example of conditions in the Baleh region let us take the Sungai Sut. In 1948 (according to official records kept at Fort Sylvia, Kapit), the Sut valley contained 21 long-houses with a total population of 1,570 persons. If we include all the land within about two miles of the rivers' courses to which settlement is confined, these 1,570 people occupied an area of somewhere about 100 square miles. Thus, if we assume that only 70% of this area is used for *padi* cultivation, the population-land ratio was not more than about 4 *bilek* families per square mile. For the Baleh region as a whole (i.e. the region contained within the fartherest points of Iban occupation), the population-land ratio is even lower, and probably lies somewhere between 2 and 3 *bilek* families per square mile.

321. As these figures indicate, the population density in the Baleh region is well below the critical level of about 9 *bilek* families per square mile. This does not mean however that serious land degradation has not been caused by the Baleh Iban. Iban methods of land usage, as we have seen, produce most deleterious results even in areas where there are adequate reserves of virgin jungle. Indeed, their whole system of land usage is a response to circumstances in which reserves of virgin jungle have been virtually limitless. When they occupied the Rejang basin, the Iban were invading the territories of alien tribes, and their understandable impulse was to exploit their gains to the full. There can be no doubt that in the past, the Iban viewed the forests that surrounded them as an expendable resource. Their method has been to extract all the wealth they could from the *kampong* nearest at hand, and then move on to fresh jungle. As already remarked, they have been less shifting cultivators than '*mangeurs de bois*'.

322. These methods—let me reiterate—have been brought about not by any scarcity of forest land, but by conditions of super-abundance. Furthermore, it is important to recognize, that from the point of view of individual *bilek* families the system of intensive usage had many marked advantages. Hundreds of families in the Baleh and similar areas, have accumulated considerable wealth (in terms of Iban values) from farming virgin jungle. Again, during the course of their advance in the Third Division, the Iban were very largely a power unto themselves. When it suited them they gave recognition to the White Rajah, but again and again, from the First Katibas Expedition in 1869 to the Second Gat Expedition of 1919, various groups resorted to open rebellion, and repeatedly defied attempts to restrain their movements. They still remain a power to be respected. It is extremely important, I would suggest, that all of these background factors

6: Freeman E-5 (1949-1951) 1958 OC6 Iban OC6

THE FAMILY SYSTEM OF THE IBAN OF BORNEO

By J. D. FREEMAN

INTRODUCTION

The Iban[1]—with whose family system this essay is concerned—are a people of western Borneo. They are to be found, for the most part, among the remote, jungle-covered ranges of the undeveloped interior zone of Sarawak, and also in certain of the inaccessible headwaters of the great Kapuas river, in what is now Kalimantan or Indonesian Borneo.

In the judgement of A. C. Haddon, the Iban are Oceanic Mongols, and they belong to an ethnic stock which he has termed Proto-Malay (Haddon and Start 1936: 1). In brief, they are a brachycephalic people (average C.I. 83), of short stature (average height of males, 5 ft. 2½ in.), with lank, black hair, cinnamon coloured skins, and typically Mongoloid features.

Iban culture is also fundamentally proto-Malayan in type. In particular, the Iban language has many close affinities with Malay, and Howell, a leading authority, classes Iban as 'a dialect of the wide spreading Malay language'. The Iban language has not, however, been influenced by Arabic; nor have Iban culture and social institutions been appreciably affected by Islam.

In Sarawak today, the Iban are the predominant element in a highly heterogeneous population. The total population of Sarawak as disclosed by the census of 1947 was 546,385, and of this number 190,326 (or 34·8 %) were Iban. Sarawak, like so many of the other countries of south-east Asia, has a plural society. Along the coast, among the deltaic swamps and in the low-lying country bordering the tidal reaches of the rivers, one finds the main centres of Malay, Chinese and Melanau settlement. Further inland, amid steep and tangled ranges drained by swift-flowing streams and rivers, live the indigenous hill peoples: the Land Dayaks, the Iban, the Kayan, the Kenyah, the Kajang and others, all of them with subsistence economies based on the shifting cultivation of dry rice.

In particular, this essay is concerned with the Ulu Ai Iban of the Baleh river of the Third Division of Sarawak. The Baleh enters the great Rejang river, from the west, at a point about 170 river miles from the sea, and along its banks and those of its numerous tributaries (the Sut, Mujong, Gat and Merirai being the most important of them), there are scattered some 133 Iban communities with a total population of about 11,500. Almost all of these

18:Sutlive E,M-5 (1957-1971) 1973 OC6 Iban OC6
Sibu

175 D. Factors Relating to Iban Migrations

166 In his discussions of the Iban migrations, Pringle writes that

> "the development of Iban 'piracy may be regarded as one symptom of a remarkable outburst of human energy which also led to the simultaneous commencement of Iban migration to the Third Division at the beginning of the nineteenth century. This expansion, both 'piratical' and territorial, could not have taken place without population growth, but it seems equally clear that it was linked to something other than demographic pressure."

On the same point, he writes:

> "It was also suggested that the further expansion of Iban settlement into the Rejang, which began not long before the First Rajah's arrival, was connected somehow with a more general florescence of Iban energies. This sudden ferment, the causes of which are unkown, also resulted in the simultaneous outbreak of Iban 'piracy' in the coastal waters of northwest Borneo."

Although admittedly there is much that must remain unkown, for want of information, about the factors and causes involved in the Iban migrations of the nineteenth century, nevertheless, there is sufficient evidence for us to make certain inferences that point to more than a "general florescence of Iban energies." On the basis of available data, we may suggest the following factors as contributing to these migrations.

1. Demographic Pressures

175 First, the Ibans were shifting cultivators facing demographic
166 pressures due to population growth. One element which continually has
161 kept the Ibans on the move has been their population increases in

175 combination with generally poor soils and the techniques of shifting
166 cultivators. The estimate of 50,000 Ibans living in the Second
161 Division in the early nineteenth century does not seem excessive and, indeed, may be quite low in light of the present Iban population of 330,000, achieved with an increase of 1.7 per cent per annum.[9]

The Second Division is an area of 4,129 square miles, into
[114] which the Ibans moved during the nineteenth century. A quick calculation reveals that the population density did not approach the figure of 46 persons per square mile, Freeman's estimate of the maximum number that could occupy an area for cultivation and allow the optimum fallow time of 12 years (1955-134, 136). But, Freeman's estimate does not take into consideration the fact that much land in Sarawak is not suitable for cultivation. As Lee notes:

> "Although the density for the country as a whole is still very low, there are areas in Sarawak where pressure of population on land resources is becoming acute. It must also be remembered that much of the empty areas of Sarawak will not have a large carrying capacity. The coastal peat-swamp forests and the inaccessible, hilly interior with only small patches of flat fertile and have little potential value for settlement and agriculture."

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[9] For references and discussion of early sources on Sarawak's population see J. L. Noakes, "The Growth of the Population of Sarawak," in L. W. Jones 1960-319-24.

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The Second Division, like all Divisions in Sarawak, contains a mixture of good and poor soils, of peat swamps and shale hills as well as more fertile land. And population increases and shorter periods of fallowing between cultivation, resulted in diminishing yields in some areas of the Second Division.

Population pressures were not only a physical but also a cultural phenomenon. The Ibans' desire for virgin jungle for hill rice farming has long been recognized. By the end of the nineteenth century, even after thousands of their peers had migrated to the Third Division and beyond, the Residents reported an increasing number of litigations over land.[10] Such disputes are rare where there still is plenty of unfelled jungle for the taking (cf. Freeman 1955-22), but most common in the Sibu District where land prices are highly inflated, and needless to say, there is no kampong lama' ("old jungle"). Confirming this point, one reliable source stated,

> "When our grandparents settled in this area, you could travel for a day or two (by dugout and paddle) before you came to another house. Now, you can't go even half-an-hour. When they came, there were no land disputes because land was plentiful. Now, there's no end of cases."

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[10] See Bailey's Reports, SG No. 406, 1 November 1899, and No. 451, 4 August 1903.

592 the acquisition of food and marketable goods. At a general meeting of
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178 the tuai rumah and tuai bilik shortly before Asun's departure for Limbang,
183 each man, beginning with the tuai rumah, spoke as eloquently as possible,
434 trying to impress upon Asun how much Ganai had spent on his support, food, education and clothing.

> "Now, you are going to earn wages, so don't forget your parents who have supported you all your life" (Diatu' nuan deka' makai gaji. Anang enda' ingat ka gida apai indai ke udah melanja ka nuan.

Even if the move of children to Sibu or elsewhere for employment, leaves no one in the bilik to look after the parents, this often is preferable, even sought, if the children contribute financially towards the
[181] support of the parents. For the Iban is cash-conscious and cash-hungary, money always being inadequate to meet their demands and desires. With only 36 per cent of the Iban population self-sufficient in rice, a majority of the families must buy this staple for a period from a few weeks to half-a-year. The uncertain prices of rubber, pepper, ginger and other products makes wage-earning an attractive situation, both for the earner and his parents or in-laws whom he may be called on to help. Hence, the changing pattern in this cardinal rule of Iban postmarital residence.

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592 The composition of the bilik-family fluctuates between the nuclear
178 family and the stem family in a majority of cases. There are a number of reasons for this fluctuation, some of which are directly related to the
[161] in-migration of Ibans to Sibu. First, the fluctuation is related with an increase in population and a concept of limited goods. In Rumah Nyala,

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592 the population increased from 113 in 1960 to 130 in 1966 and 246 in 1970.
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161 During the same years the number of bilik increased from 19 to 26 to 33. This increase was due in part to the marriage in of a number of persons, in part to the number of births exceeding deaths, and in part, to newcomers to the community. During this period, 55 members of the longhouse took up employment elsewhere, either on a commuting basis or for periods up to two years when they are absent from the community. Although these persons are officially recognized as members of Rumah Nyala, if they and their dependents are deducted from the population figure, the remainder in actual daily residence at Rumah Nyala is 165.

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592 We have noted in the cases of Mayah and Ganai that the composition of their families varied with the movements in and out of their children
178 and siblings and that this was correlated in part with their children's
464 employment. When Noel quit his job, he returned to Mayah's bilik. When he found new employment, he and his family moved to Sibu. In discussing the reasons for his moving out, Noel said that although his family usually has enough rice, yet their land can support only so many people. In addition, his employment opens a new source for exploitation, to supplement padi-farming. Further, he said that as their bilik is not wealthy, and Vornica is a girl, it is better that she stays to take care of Mayah and to inherit the bilik.